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ABSTRACT

A cross-disciplinary project at the University of South Alabama has been successful in improving the technical competence of undergraduate writers in all academic fields. For the geography department, this project has involved developing courses which teach writing as part of the thinking process and problem-solving method. While instructors have encountered several problems in carrying out this program, such as how to determine the value of writing assignments in the final grade and how to assign writing activities in large lecture courses, the university offers workshops to faculty facing these problems. Writing labs are also provided for students with difficulties. Student evaluations indicate that the writing assignments have been one of the most helpful activities in the geography curriculum. (LP)

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WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM: GEOGRAPHY

by

Glenn R. Sebastian

University of South Alabama

There has been much rhetoric lately from Presidential Commissions, Educational Councils, and various pedogogical task forces, informing the public of real or potential failures in our educational system. The lack of writing skills seem to be at the forefront of each report. In the January/February 1983 issue of the "Journal of Geography," Michael Libbee and Dennis Young discuss problems dealing with students who do not write well, but find themselves in large geography lecture courses where there is no incentive to write. The article suggests "that teaching students to write like geographers is teaching them to think like geographers," thus fulfilling two essential tasks of the curriculum. In the July 20, 1983 "Chronicle of Higher Education," Stacey Palmer again challenges professors to take a writing approach in teaching the student. Dr. David Hamilton,

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a writing specialist from the University of Iowa uses the analogy of playing the violin to that of riding a bicycle. In order to become proficient in playing the violin, one must practice playing the instrument each day, which is different than riding a bicycle, where years may intervene between use, writing must be approached in the same manner. Frequent writing assignments of short duration will "tune-up" writing techniques, and students will feel more at ease when confronting a writing assignment. "Writing specialists maintain that students are less likely to benefit from long term-paper assignments because they often write them in a hurry toward the end of the semester and don't get a chance to work on problems their instructors point out."

The idea to increase writing as a more central part of college courses is becoming more popular, because the student is more likely to learn something when they can write about it. As Libbee and Young state, "teaching students to write like geographers is teaching them to think like geographers." As professional geographers this may be our golden opportunity to make real strides in improving geography's position in the core curriculum.

Although these writing programs go under a multitude of names, the University of South Alabama has initiated a program entitled "Writing Across the Curriculum," a movement to increase the use of writing assignments in all disciplinary areas. The University feels that after the college freshman composition course has been completed, many undergraduates may do very little writing, and the quality of the writing is rarely evaluated. Through a variety of curriculum changes and faculty development programs, the university is seeking new ways to use writing in the learning process and at the same time, increase the technical competence of undergraduate writers.

Interpretation of Transparency on Job Qualification

"What Employees are seeking in Business Graduates."

"Wall Street Journal"
"The Collegiate Forum"
Winter 1980-81

TRANSPARENCY #1

The major purpose of this paper is to inform you of the status of geography in the writing across the curriculum - program at the University of South Alabama. The Geography department is taking an active role in

FACTORS IN OBTAINING EMPLOYMENT

	%		
	Very Important	Important	Not Important
Grade Point Average	25.7	64.5	11.8
Oral Communication Skills	69.0	30.0	1.0
Written Communication Skills	38.3	52.2	9.5
Poise	42.9	57.1	0
Appearance	37.9	56.9	5.2
Social Graces	6.8	64.0	29.2
Personality	44.1	51.6	4.3
School Attended	1.1	51.6	47.3
Recommendations	16.9	52.8	30.3

Table 2
FACTORS IN SUCCEEDING ON THE JOB AND RECEIVING PROMOTIONS

	%		
	Very Important	Important	Not Important
Grade Point Average	2.2	32.3	65.5
Oral Communication Skills	75.3	23.7	1.0
Written Communication Skills	61.7	35.1	3.2
Poise	43.0	51.6	5.4
Appearance	29.0	68.8	2.2
Social Graces	8.8	61.2	30.0
Personality	52.7	44.1	3.2
School Attended	0	12.9	87.1
Recommendations	11.3	33.7	55.0

Dr. Blitstein is a Professor of Economics at Southwest State University in Marshall, Minn.

reforming the general education curriculum. Each summer, the University sponsors a one week (approximately) 40 hour writing seminar for faculty. The participants receive a stipend from the University and granted release time during the next academic year for course development. The writing seminar is directed by a paid consultant, who assists the University's writing staff by preparing faculty members for the increased class preparation, evaluation techniques, and above all, confidence. Participants in the writing seminar are selected from all colleges within the university.

The University has changed the curriculum to reflect the writing competency requirement.

TRANSPARENCY #2 & #3

The Geography Department feels that writing should be an integral part of the Geography curriculum, and is in the process of developing courses with a writing component.

Conservation: A Writing Component

TRANSPARENCY #4

TRANSPARENCY #2

Writing Competency Requirements

The University of South Alabama requires all undergraduate students to demonstrate their writing competency before they will be awarded a degree. A comprehensive writing program has been designed to achieve this goal. It includes the following requirements.

1. EH 101 and/or EH 102
   Entering freshmen demonstrate their competency in basic writing skills by passing the EH 101 competency exam or exempting the EH 101 requirement.
   (Freshmen with a superior ACT English score may exempt EH 101, or exemption may be awarded by the English Department.)
2. USA 010 or EH 101
   Students transferring to the University must demonstrate their competency by a procedure similar to the one required of freshmen. Students who have completed their first course (English I, Composition I, etc.) in a non-remedial freshman composition sequence at another institution can satisfy this requirement in any one of the following ways.
   a. By reporting ACT English score of 23 or above (SAT 465 or above on verbal portion) to the Office of Admissions.
   b. By signing up for USA 010 (the competency/placement exam) within three quarters of enrollment — and passing the writing exam.
   c. By enrolling in and exempting or passing EH 101.

   Eligibility for the USA 010 exam will be noted on the transfer-credit evaluation forms. Students who fail the exam must pass EH 101 before they will be approved for graduation.
3. Two designated writing credit (W) courses.
   In addition to the composition/communication requirements of the individual colleges, the University requires that a candidate for graduation must have completed two upper-level writing-credit courses, with at least one course chosen from offerings in his major or minor. Courses carrying this required credit are identified in the quarterly schedules by a (W) after the course title. Satisfactory completion of the writing competency requirement (EH 101, USA 010) is prerequisite to taking writing credit courses.

TRANSPARENCY #3

GEOGRAPHY

CHAIRMAN DR. GLENN SEBASTIAN LBCS 341 [illegible]

[illegible]	GEO	110	1		INTRO TO GEOG	4	MTWR	1100	1150	L DILSAVER	LBCS	110
[illegible]	GEO	110	2		INTRO TO GEOG	4	MTRF	1200	1250	V RIVIZZIGNO	LBCS	46
[illegible]	GEO	111	1		INTRO TO PHYSICAL GEOG	4	MTWR	800	850	G SEBASTIAN	LBCS	46
[illegible]	GEO	111	2		INTRO TO PHYSICAL GEOG	4	MTWR	900	950	L DILSAVER	LBCS	36
[illegible]	GEO	113	1		WLD GEO THIRD WLD NATION	4	MTRF	800	850	V RIVIZZIGNO	LBCS	46
[illegible]	GEO	113	2		WLD GEO EUROPE	4	MTWR	900	950	L DILSAVER	LBCS	46
[illegible]	GEO	114	1		INTRO TO HUMAN GEOG	4	MTRF	1000	1050	V RIVIZZIGNO	LBCS	46
[illegible]	GEO	131	1		MAP INTERPRETATION	2	TR	1000	1050	E WILSON	LBCS	[illegible]
[illegible]	GEO	131	2		MAP INTERPRETATION	2	MW	900	950	E WILSON	LBCS	[illegible]
[illegible]	GEO	341	1		METEOROLOGY	4	MTR	1000	1050	A WILLIAMS	LBCS	110
[illegible]	GEO	341	1	1	LABORATORY	0	W	800	1050	A WILLIAMS	LBCS	110
[illegible]	GEO	311	1		CONSERVATION (W)	4	MTWR	1100	1150	G BEBASTIAN	LBCS	46
					GEO 311 INCLUDES A WRITING COMPONENT AND PARTIALLY SATISFIES REQUIREMENT FOR (W) COURSES. SEE UNIVERSITY BULLETIN PAGE 47							
[illegible]	GEO	351	1		CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY	4	MTWR	1100	1150	E WILSON	LBCS	36
[illegible]	GEO	482	1		SEM. GEOGRAPHIC LIT	4	TR	900	950	E WILSON	LBCS	107

****** EVENING AND WEEKEND COURSES ******

[illegible]	GEO	111	81		INTRO TO PHYSICAL GEOG	4	MW	800	940	J CLUTE	LBCS	110
[illegible]	GEO	111	91		INTRO TO PHYSICAL GEOG	4	S	800	1150	G BEBASTIAN	LBCS	46

TRANSPARENCY #4

Assignment 1: What is Conservation?

Conservation has a different meaning to different people. To some it may be protection of a particular animal species, to another it may be securing adequate space to hunt deer. In the first assignment the student states his/her meaning of conservation.

Assignment 2: A Recent Example of Primary/Secondary Succession.

Succession is an important concept in understanding the change of natural habitats. This is especially true when man interfers in the natural order. The student is asked to observe, and even to use their imagination in discussing hypothetical examples of primary/secondary succession.

Assignment 3: Observe and Describe a Symbiotic Relationship.

All life within an ecosystem is interrelated. Understanding these relationships are important if one is to interpret the status and function of an ecosystem.

Assignment 4: Ecosystem Interpretation.

An area is selected on campus. The selection is based upon variety of life, problems, etc. An example of the instruction sheet is attached.

Assignment 5: Discuss Mobile's Most Urgent Environmental Problem.

Mobile is a dynamic community. The Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway, an active Convention Bureau. increased industrial development and petroleum exploration have brought their assorted problems. The student is asked to write on his/her perception of the most important problem.

Assignment 6: National Park Study

Each student is asked to submit the name of their favorite National park. Then, they are told that due to the financial crisis facing the United States, it has been decided by Secretary Watts to close the parks. The student is asked to write a paper defending the existence of their Park on grounds that it is unique and worth saving.

The department's goal is to teach writing in Geography classes as a thinking process and problem solving method. Each writing assignment should be an outgrowth of classroom lectures and discussion, with a challenge to broaden the topic through further observation and research.

Teaching through writing can be painful. As Professor Drenk of Montana State University states, "Not only can writing assignments take time to develop and grade, but they often reveal that students have learned less than their teachers hoped. Teachers also must contend with students who resent writing requirements on subjects that do not usually demand them."

There is bound to be problems with initiating a new program. Writing across the curriculum is not unique.

(1) Grading - the grading technique has been the most difficult time to handle during this novice stage. Not only must the content be evaluated, but spelling, grammar, and general communicative skills must be considered.

(2) How much value should the writing assignements have in the final grade?

(3) Changing the topics. Naturally, the writing exercises must be returned if they are to improve the writing skills of the student. These papers

enter mysterious files to be used over and over again.

(4) Large introductory courses where number of students prohibits the use of writing assignments.

In order to assist faculty who are facing specific problems, the university has follow-up sessions to answer questions. Pre selected papers are read which vividly illustrate specific errors. I have found these sessions to be most helpful and encouraging.

Students who have problems can be referred to a writing lab where all writing assignments for (W) designated classes are on file. Teachers and graduate students specializing in rhetoric help these students overcome hurdles they face.

The teacher-course evaluation has been very interesting. Generally, students confess that they learned more through writing assignments than through any other academic activity. This doesn't say much for my lectures, but it does say something positive about the new approach. The narrative writing evaluations have been supportive. It has encouraged students to search the geographic literature, and has challenged them to think, write and observe the world as a Geographer.